

Andros

by Tim Ingmire

When divers think of the Bahamas the first thing that often comes to mind is sharks - mostly of the Tiger and Caribbean reef variety. Search for the Bahamas on some of the popular underwater photography websites and you see pictures of . . . sharks. This should come as no surprise as two of the world's more famous dive centres, Jim Abernethy and Stuart Cove, are based here. Even a recent article in one of the UK's popular diving magazines focused (somewhat disparagingly) on the shark diving, and not a single positive remark on the state of the overdived reefs and other fish life. Other than sharks then (oh and a couple of famous, but tired, underwater sets for James Bond movies) does the Bahamas really offer much else? Well, go to Andros Island and you can see another side to Bahamian diving, with some fantastic photographic opportunities!

Andros is the largest of the Islands in the Bahamas at 104 miles long and 40 miles at its widest point, yet it is the least developed with only about 6000 inhabitants. Much of the Island (in truth 3 islands; North Andros, Mangrove Cay and South Andros) is made of densely wooded areas and large parts of it are comprised of mangrove estuaries and tidal swamps. This means that not only is the land in a natural state but so are the reefs - especially in the area we visited at the southeast of the North Island around Cargill Creek.

How natural? Well, it is truly possible to dive on sites where there is no record of scuba divers having visited before. That's right - virgin



*Like many of it's inhabitants, buildings such as this beach-side bar can provide some real colour.
Nikon D70, Nikon 12-24mm Lens ISO 200, f8, 1/800
Aperture Priority*

sites! And what makes the diving so special is that the reef, the third largest barrier reef in the world, fringes the "Tongue of the Ocean"; a deep trench that drops to 6000ft. Of course, diving virgin reef sites presents the obvious problem to the photographer in that you do not know what to expect there, and if you don't know what to expect, then what lens do you take? Given that I spent three weeks in North Sulawesi a year ago and managed to get lots of macro shots, I decided to spend more time with the wide angle lenses and try out the Magic Filters, as well as the dual strobes and Nikon 10.5mm lens I'd bought since my last blue water trip.

The first dive was, appropriately enough, a shark dive. We had landed and arrived at the dive centre (www.coralcavernsresort.com) with good weather so Paul, the Diving Director, decided to take us out to where he had recently discovered



*Point at an upwards angle, into the sun and with strobe to add a little drama on the corals – 101 in Ignoring Magic Filter Instructions!
Nikon D70, Nexus D70, Nikon 10.5mm Lens, Magic Filter, Inon 240 ISO 400, f8 1/160, Manual*



Almost all the sites visited had an abundance of healthy sponges and assorted corals.

Nikon D70, Nexus D70, Nikon 12-24mm Lens, Inon 240 + Inon 220, ISO 200, f10 1/500, Manual

a great shark site. We needed good weather and little wind as we were to find ourselves right out in the blue; miles into the Tongue where the US Navy had secured a buoy with the bottom right down way way below us. Immediately upon dropping in we could see the occasional sleek, but distant, bodies of the Silkies that Paul assured us would be there. Hanging around the shot line that disappeared below us we were soon joined by more sharks than I could count.

Round and round they went but never daring to come too close; a result, I guess, of the fact that we hadn't lured them in by feeding. This meant that I couldn't get the shot I was after with the 12-24mm lens I'd chosen, but who cares? This was exhilarating stuff! A thick shoal of rainbow runners also joined us, a giant barracuda and even a wahoo - a real pelagic species that we would not see when back on the shallow reefs. Unfortunately none of them wanted to get up close and



There are many blue holes around the Bahamas. This inland site required a short trek, with 4wheel drive, into one of the forested Andros National Parks.

Nikon D70, Nikon 12-24mm Lens, ISO 200, f14, 1/160, Aperture Priority

personal for that winning shot!

As it turned out, after this dive the wind blew up enough that we couldn't safely moor up on the buoy again so we set about diving the reefs for the rest of the week. Some of these Paul had dived a couple of times before but for many he had only the co-ordinates, after being towed behind the boat, searching for sites. Having previously only dived the well-known and well-dived parts of the world, the thought of diving new sites was very

exciting. One of the more dived sites was called 'The Burbs', a shallow sandy site with numerous small coral outcrops. This gave me an excellent opportunity to really give the Magic Filters a run and this I did on the 10.5mm fisheye. I had previously tested the Greenwater filter and liked what I saw however, the results I obtained with the original Bluewater filter were fantastic! I was regularly white balancing the camera, taking the shots and then admiring the result



A little illumination with a strobe in combination with a magic Filter gives this fan a surreal colour.
Nikon D70, Nexus D70, Nikon 10.5mm Lens, Magic Filter, Inon 240, ISO 400, f8 1/160, Manual

in the LCD screen. There were colours - real actual colour just as I could see in front of me. The use of ambient light made the photography so much easier and, as I was trying to direct a model, really allowed me to concentrate on the composition rather than all



“The Burbs” site had a wealth of small coral – great fun with a Magic Filter.
Nikon D70, Nexus D70, Nikon 10.5mm Lens, Magic Filter, ISO 400, f7.1, 1/80, Aperture Priority

the various technical aspects of getting the lighting right. A real breath of fresh air!

One of the lesser-known features of Bahamian diving is the Blue Holes made famous by the likes of Rob Palmer. These are cave systems and many link up an inland cave with a sea cave. They are subject to the tides and currents and can be dangerous places to dive - even by caving standards - shifting, as they do, huge amounts of water around the islands. Paul had been told of a small hole within the reef from a couple of local fisherman and had cautiously dived around it judging the movement of the water at various states of the tide. My buddy Mark and Paul dropped down into the hole during slack water whilst I satisfied myself with the occasional photo around the mouth of the cave - again with the 10.5mm and filter but also having a play with a strobe. That's not something that is required in water so shallow but I had the



When on land, it is still possible to practice your close-up stalking techniques on the many lizards.
Nikon D70, Nikon 105mm Macro Lens, ISO 200, f14, 1/60, Aperture Priority

urge to experiment. The resultant red tinge to the strobe lit area can be used, in my view, to interesting effect.

The rest of the week we spent around a number of what were called ‘White Holes’ - these are sandy areas within the reef surrounded by coral outcrops up to 3 metres tall in places. Many that we dived were totally encircled by the coral. These sites were totally undived. At the first, Paul stopped the boat, donned a mask and, hanging over the side, put his head in the water. He came back up with the words, “It’s beautiful down there!”. Well, you don’t need much more incentive than that and with the anchor dropped into the sand, we plunged in.

Beautiful it certainly was! Not only this one but every single white hole we visited. In one we spotted giant barracuda, conch, parrot fish, trigger fish, tile fish, jaw fish, jacks, Nassau groupers, large snapper, butterfly fish and, to top it all, a 3



With diving this good, who needs to sit around and chill?

Nikon D70, Nikon 12-24mm Lens ISO 200, f8, 1/1000, Aperture Priority

metre Caribbean reef shark cruising around. Stunning stuff indeed! If that is not enough, the coral everywhere was in great condition - really great condition - and that was what I was after. I wanted to see and prove that the coral was in pristine condition from The Burbs, to the White Holes, and the various Coral Labyrinths and Canyons offering some excellent swim-throughs around the area. Yes



Nikon D70, Nexus D70, Nikon 10.5mm Lens, Magic Filter, ISO 400, f7.1, 1/160, Aperture Priority

there were a lot of bigger fish but invariably I never managed to get the right site, fish and lens all at the same time. When I bolted on the 60mm or 105mm macro lenses, the bigger fish didn't want to get close or the surge from the swell at the surface made steady close-ups difficult - the life of a DSLR photographer!

One new site we dived clearly had it's halcyon days well behind it.

We named it "Parrot Reef" because there were so many parrot fish - and also because it is an ex-reef! It had clearly been battered by a storm in the past but was showing some signs of revival, but it will be some time before it's back to its previous glory. This was the only reef we came across in this state or, indeed, anything like it, but we did spot a resting nurse shark under a coral head as a nice highlight. Every other reef we dived was in excellent condition and this is testament to the lack of diving done in these parts. In fact, not only did we not spot another diver in the week we were there, we did not even see another diving boat or any other boat

for that matter. It really was fantastic!

As the dive centre was so easy to get to (direct flights to Nassau from London Heathrow followed by a ten minute flight to Andros Town and a ten minute drive to the centre) and the diving so good, we will be back to Andros and Coral Caverns and hopefully it will still be quiet, undeveloped and an absolute pleasure to dive. Next time though, I'll be after shots of the bigger fish and, who knows, maybe even some cracking natural shots of the sharks.

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www.digigreen.net



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